

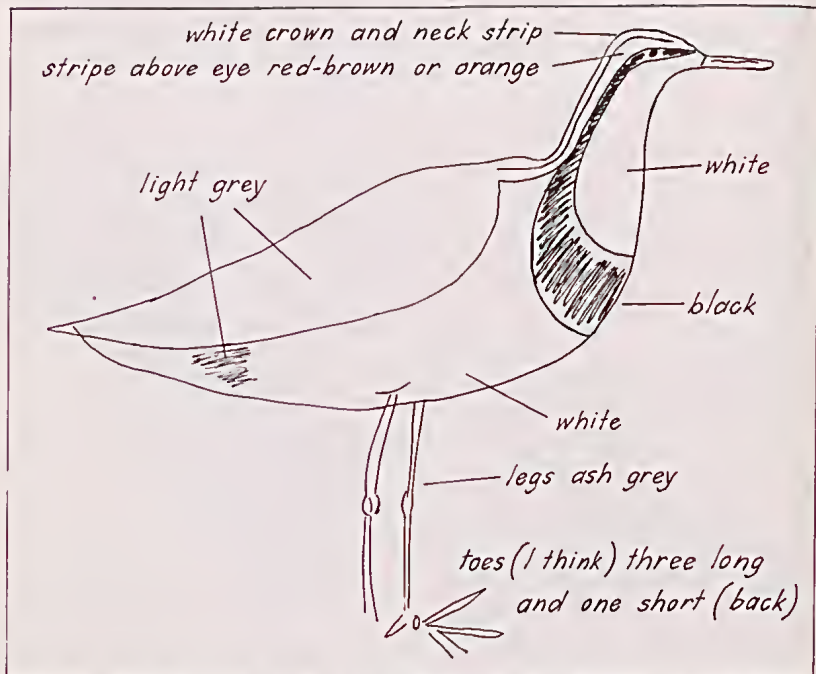
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AN OBSERVATION OF THE PHEASANT-TAILED JACANA IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

By G. M. STORR and R. E. JOHNSTONE,
Western Australian Museum, Perth

Early this year Mr. Joseph A. Smith sought our help in identifying a strange bird he saw on 22 December, 1974 at the north-western iron-mining town of Paraburdoo (23°12'S, 117°40'E).

Mr. Smith wrote, "Here's a mystery for you to solve, nothing like it in Cayley's or Slater's books. Seen feeding in water's edge at sewage pond. Legs long (about 9 or 10 inches) and toes (front) seemed quite long. The black band across its chest 2 inches wide at base and narrowing as it reaches eye. With the brown-coloured stripe on each side of its head down to the shoulder and the white central strip [of crown] and bib and belly it is quite an attractive bird. Height of bird seen next to a Black-tailed Water Hen about 3 inches shorter. When I saw it fly,



Copy of field sketch by Mr. J. A. Smith of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana.

the depth of wings was rather great and the flight similar to that of the Lapwing and other plovers. Bill about one inch long. I have no record of tail length, so assume that it was short. The bird was gone next day."

A rough sketch of the feeding bird, as seen from behind, shows the wing tips crossing each other and extending beyond the tail. A sketch of the bird in profile is reproduced here. In a subsequent letter, Mr Smith told us that the bird was wading in the water (which explains his failure to record details of the feet).

It was soon evident to us that this was no resident Australian bird or regular visitor. We therefore searched the literature for descriptions of moderately large Asian aquatic birds. Only one species fitted Mr. Smith's sketches and description, namely the non-breeding form of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana, *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*, which ranges from Pakistan east through southern China and Malaya to Formosa, the Philippines and Java.

We sent a photocopy of Mr. Smith's letter and sketches to Mr. John Darnell of Goldsworthy for his opinion on the bird. Mr. Darnell, an expert on south-east Asian birds, immediately recognised the bird and telephoned us to confirm our identification.

Meanwhile we had sent similar photocopies to the British Museum (Natural History) for checking directly against specimens of *Hydrophasianus*. On 31 January 1975, Mr. Peter Colston replied, "I have looked at the skins in the collection and it fits and compares very well with a female collected by H. Whistler in February 1936 from the Chanda Dist., Central Prov., India . . . I have also looked through the waders, i.e. lapwings etc. and Wilson's Phalarope, but none agree."

Great numbers of birds from northern Asia visit Western Australia every summer. Visitors from subtropical and tropical Asia, however, are a very rare category, which hitherto included only the Malay Banded Crake (*Rallina fasciata*) and the Blue-winged Pitta (*Pitta moluccensis*). To these we can now add the Pheasant-tailed Jacana.

According to Hugh Whistler (*Popular Handbook of Indian Birds*) the Pheasant-tailed Jacana is similar to other members of the Jacanidae in favouring waters with floating vegetation, but it is "more ready to frequent open water, and more accustomed to wander to flood water, streams, and similar spots free of weeds." It is therefore not so surprising to find this species in a region that is completely lacking in habitat suitable for its relative, the Australian Lotus-bird.

When breeding the Pheasant-tailed Jacana is a very beautiful bird. It then acquires tail plumes half a metre long, and the body becomes glossy chocolate brown.

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

The Black Tern near Perth.—The Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) does not appear to be unquestionably admitted as a member of the Australian avifauna (cf. Serventy *et al.*, *The Handbook of Australian Sea-Birds*, 1971: 206). However I am satisfied I observed an individual resting on a partly submerged post in Lake Joondalup on December 31, 1973.

The bird was in winter plumage and had the following characteristics: A small marsh tern having the forehead, neck and underparts white with a greyish patch on the side of the breast in front of the wing. The bill was black and the legs red. The back and wings were slate grey. The flight was typically buoyant in character. The bird allowed a very close approach but once disturbed it flew off and was not observed to feed.

The species is readily distinguished in its winter plumage from all sea terns by its distinctive "bat-like" flight and greyish black upper parts. The only species with which it could be readily confused is the White-